

**OSCE Chairmanship Conference on Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims
Cordoba, October 9-10, 2007
Canada's intervention
Fifth Plenary Session**

Canada would like to thank the Spanish OSCE Chairmanship for hosting this Conference on Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims. The city of Cordoba, with its historical link to Islam, is a perfect place for discussing such an issue.

Like many other OSCE countries, Canada must address the challenges of integrating an increasingly diverse population, made up of people of many origins, beliefs, and cultures.

Pluralism is the principle that binds our diverse peoples together. It is essential to our civil society and economic strength. It evolved out of our foundational values: freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

In Canada, the Muslim population, at over 600,000, is a fast growing segment of our society and is projected to double in number approximately every 10 years in part due to increased immigration from Muslim-majority countries. Muslim-Canadians have roots in a hundred different countries and have a multitude of linguistic and cultural heritages.

Canada has a solid framework that supports the principles of pluralism and the rights of individuals, protecting them from all forms of discrimination. The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, the *Canadian Human Rights Act*, and provincial and territorial human rights legislation prohibit discrimination based on race, religion, and other grounds.

The Government of Canada took a decisive step in 2005 to address the reality of racism and intolerance through the announcement of *Canada's Action Plan Against Racism*. One of the Plan's key objectives is to strengthen social cohesion, and it is a significant step in addressing racial discrimination in a coordinated manner.

We believe in the importance of consulting and engaging ethno-cultural and religious minorities on issues that affect them. For instance, in 2005, Canada created the Muslim Communities Working Group within the Department of Foreign Affairs to ensure a well-informed approach to Canada's relations with Muslim communities abroad. The Group helps inform our foreign policy to address common challenges of democratic governance, human rights, and integration. This work is informed by and helps to further develop our rich experience in pluralism and multiculturalism.

In 2004, the OSCE affirmed that respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms is an important element of ensuring peace and stability and prevention of terrorism and acknowledged that the effective prevention of and fight against terrorism require the involvement of civil society in our countries.

In that spirit, the Government of Canada met and consulted formally with representatives of about 22 ethno-cultural and religious organizations on the impact of the *Anti-Terrorism Act* on their communities. In addition, during the course of the Parliamentary review of that *Act*, representatives from organizations such as the Canadian Jewish Congress, the Canadian Arab Federation, the Canadian Islamic Congress, and the Muslim Lawyers' Association had an opportunity to advise parliamentarians of their concerns and present recommendations.

Similarly, in 2005, Canada established the Cross-Cultural Roundtable on Security to engage Canadians in a long-term dialogue on national security issues in a diverse and pluralistic society. The goal of the Roundtable is to ensure that national security is a complementary component to our Canadian values of individual rights and freedoms.

Canada also supports awareness-raising and outreach initiatives for Muslim-Canadian communities, which seek to increase participation of these communities in the public life of Canada and increase cross-cultural understanding.

As an example, the Multiculturalism Program of the Department of Canadian Heritage recently funded the Muslim Association of Newfoundland and Labrador to undertake a symposium on issues faced by youth from different cultural and religious background. The Multiculturalism Program is also funding a project of the Canadian Council of Muslim Women aimed at increasing civic participation of Muslim women across the country. We are pleased that a representative of the Council is here today; it serves to illustrate the engagement of Canada's active civil society.

The media is a key tool in promoting cross-cultural understanding and exchanging successful practices in the fight against racism and we are pleased that it is a topic for this Conference. Through the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission, Canada has adopted policies to ensure that our media is used appropriately to disseminate positive information on Canada's diverse society, to increase the representation of minority groups in mainstream broadcast media and to eliminate the perpetuation of negative stereotypes. Further, diversity is a key principle underlying the *Broadcasting Act*.

No where is this promotion more apparent than a television comedy by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation entitled *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, a sitcom that has shed a respectful but humorous light on Islam and Muslims so that we may rectify misunderstandings about the faith and its adherents, both in Canada and abroad. The sitcom reveals that, although different, Canadians are all surprisingly similar when it comes to family, love, the generation gap and our attempts to balance our secular and religious lives.

In its anti-racism strategy, Canada also emphasizes the importance of engaging children and youth. It is the key to maximizing their full contribution to society and to sustaining an open, civic-minded society. That is why we promote a lifelong educational approach to anti-racism and multiculturalism, and engage children and youth early on through awareness and public education activities.

As Prime Minister Harper said recently "Successful pluralist societies foster the equal participation of all people in political, economic, educational and socio-cultural life. Preserving

the ethno-cultural traditions that so enrich our society is the right of all individuals in the context of their families, religious congregations and cultural associations, and does not, in and of itself, detract in any way from our shared Canadian citizenship.”

We are honoured that the Aga Khan has chosen Ottawa, our country’s capital, to establish its Global Centre for Pluralism and we are proud to bring our contribution to this initiative. The Centre will promote pluralism internationally as a means to advance good governance, peace and human development.

Taken together, all these concrete efforts symbolize our country’s unwavering commitment to combat religious intolerance and all forms of discrimination and to promote mutual understanding. Canadians recognize the scope of the challenge, and we remain determined to achieve it.

We must continually work to ensure that our pluralistic society is a source of strength, of pride, and that it lies at the heart of what it means to be Canadian.

To conclude, turning our eyes to OSCE institutions, we would like to commend the Tolerance and Non-discrimination program of the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the OSCE for its work in the promotion of mutual respect and understanding, notably through education, law enforcement training and civil society capacity building programs and the tolerance and non-discrimination information system.

Canada would also like to express its support for the maintenance of The Three Personal Representatives of the Chairman-in-office to promote greater tolerance and combat racism, xenophobia and discrimination across the OSCE region.

We hope that this week’s fruitful discussions will lead the way to a better understanding of the roots and consequences of intolerance and discrimination against Muslims and that it will provide building blocks for an enhanced implementation of our regional and international human rights commitments.